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Title: The omnipresent character and possible worlds theory: the case of Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Author: Mikołaj Marks

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Keywords: possible worlds; storyworld; Cormac McCarthy; omnipresence

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Correspondence: Mikołaj Marks, e: mikolaj.marks@phdstud.ug.edu.pl.

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The omnipresent character and possible worlds theory: the case of Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Mikołaj Marks¹

Abstract

Fictional texts might present storyworlds that include both human characters and omnipresent characters. When they share the same ontological plane the specific dynamic occurs between them. Furthermore omnipresent characters may be able to transgress a singular plane, in consequence making the whole storyworld appear more complex, but also seem less coherent. This essay focuses on the case of Judge Holden, the antagonist of Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*, in order to dissect the role of an omnipresent character within the fictional world. The introduction contextualizes the figure of an omnipresent character, by explicating its nature on the background of other texts and their characters. Applying the possible worlds theory adapted by literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan serves as the adequate means of analysis. Her take on possible worlds theory enables to make a clear distinctions between ontological planes that an omnipresent character occupies and define what it means for the reader.

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Multiple fictional worlds consist of both powerful, omnipotent characters and regular, human characters, while interactions between them create a specific dynamic that is developed around transgressing the boundaries between worlds within the totality that is storyworld. Literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan regards storyworlds as “totalities that encompass space, time, and individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events”², thus they provide frames for narratives and their characters. Within such a frame characters might disclose some omnipotent properties, and still keep the narrative order intact. Furthermore, the direct interactions of human and omnipotent characters prove that they occupy the same ontological space and inhabit the same world, but the omnipotent character might be able to transcend it. In this essay I intend to emphasize omnipotent characters' ability to do so; hence I will focus on their omnipresence. Moreover, such omnipresent characters can be highly developed, complex and intelligent entities with their own motivations and goals. In this fashion they resemble humans. On the other hand their supernatural

¹University of Gdańsk.  orcid.org/0000-0001-5993-8309.

²Ryan, “From possible worlds to storyworlds,” 63.

status might grant them the power to manipulate reality, and to influence human characters using their own, mysterious means. Therefore they seem to traverse other ontological spaces, inaccessible to human characters. In this text I aim to name what those spaces might be, and what the access to them might signify for the structure of the whole storyworld and its overall reception.

Omnipotent characters tend to be powerful beings such as gods, or lesser evil or good spirits. Their omnipotence may seem to vary. One might claim that some characters are nigh-omnipotent or semi-omnipotent, yet in fact omnipotence should not be graduated because it is absolute by definition. Such a property leads to the paradox that an omnipotent character seemingly is able to “bring about a state of affairs that it is logically impossible for an omnipotent being to bring about.”³ Theists and logicians have argued about God’s omnipotence in Christianity. Some state that “the biblical teaching does not demonstrate that events in creation are determined by chance (or randomness); nor are they determined by impersonal fate (or determinism), but by God, who is the personal yet infinitely powerful Creator and Lord.”⁴ In Christianity God’s omnipotence means also that he may directly interfere with the business of others. In this case God can be both personal and total, even if this is a logical contradiction. It is the ability to breach the boundaries of certain ontological spaces, to shift between regular human and total, omnipotent so, ultimately, a character’s omnipresence that I consider of importance to my analysis. In the Bible, Moses, a physical character was able to talk with God in the form of a burning bush. For the time of the conversation the

spirit entered the ontological space of a mortal being. God and Moses interacted and shared a narrative utterance. After the exchange Moses remained physical and God transcended what Moses might have established as his reality or world. This particular scene exemplifies that the Christian God as a fictional character might transcend boundaries between worlds.

Further, other gods or god-like characters possess similar properties. Already in ancient Egyptian mythology appeared characters of gods who “continuously and practically without exception claim a boundless and arbitrary power to do whatever comes to their minds, often expressed in stereotyped pairs of two polar and opposite qualities.”⁵ Their omnipotence thus was disputable, but nevertheless, such a bipolar stance opened multiple ontological spaces for them to venture upon, signifying their omnipresence. Andrew Collins puts forward that in ancient Egypt “by the New Kingdom period, the king’s divinity was believed to be imbued by his possession of a divine manifestation of the god Amun-Re.”⁶ Hence in that narrative Amun-Re not only occupied his spiritual realm but also dwelled among humans as a pharaoh. Furthermore, the works of ancient Greeks include characters whose omnipotence is suggested through transgressing boundaries between worlds through their omnipresence. Prominent examples may be found in the *Iliad*. According to Versnel, Homer “in one and the same passage pictures Diomedes wounding the goddess Aphrodite with his spear, causing her divine blood (*ichôr*) to stream from the wound and making her suffer (Il. 5.339 ff.),²⁹ and receiving the warning from Apollo.”⁷ Again, gods come down from their original, spiritual ontological plane to interact directly with hu-

³Richard R. La Croix, “The impossibility of defining ‘omnipotence,’” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 32, no. 2 (1977): 181.

⁴Harold Godfrey, “God’s omnipotence: a literary investigation,” *Pharos Journal of Theology*, vol. 103 (2022): 8.

⁵Versnel, *Coping With the Gods: wayward readings in Greek theology*, 396.

⁶Andrew Collins, “The divinity of the pharaoh in Greek sources,” *The Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014): 841.

⁷Versnel, *Coping With the Gods: wayward readings in Greek theology*, 390.

mans. Their omnipresence enables them to mend the obvious contradictory state of being divine and human simultaneously.

Fictional texts have introduced multiple other instances of god-like, omnipresent beings, which include devils, demons and also artificial intelligence constructs. Demons sometimes assume a human appearance in order to put their malicious intentions in motion. For example Nathan Alan Breen establishes that “the Anglo-Saxons did not necessarily see the Devil as stationary.”⁸ That means that also demonic characters may disclose omnipresent properties, through their non-corporeal characteristics. Kirk Wetters observes that the demonic is “identified with ambiguity.”⁹ Such an ambiguity might also concern the ability of demons to travel through spaces inaccessible for humans; this confirms their omnipresent qualities.

H.P. Lovecraft created an entire universe with its own mythos, a gallery of creatures that are ambiguous by nature. His “gods and monsters are employed to further such concepts as scientific indifferentism and the existence of a reality beyond human conception.”¹⁰ In Lovecraft’s works the Old Gods occupy indescribable ontological spaces, that are beyond human comprehension; yet on many instances they also reveal themselves among humans. Those occurrences are most often horrific revelations for human characters. Nevertheless, Lovecraftian mythos contains examples of characters that are omnipresent from a human perspective, which is physically anchored in a singular, actual world.

Further, artificial intelligence (AI) constructs may also share the omnipresent and spiritual properties of a god. They can have their own motivations and transcend physicality through

being ontologically grounded in cyberspace. Examples of this are the AIs named Wintermute and Neuromancer from the pivotal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson. They transgress the boundaries between the virtual world and the physical world to fulfill their own purposes. Isabella Hermann states that “in popular SF, precisely for the sake of dramatic storytelling, AI is often anthropomorphized and given human or even superhuman qualities that exceed the actual capabilities of the technology and can even become magical.”¹¹ The omnipresence of cyberspace in the technologically advanced world grants AIs’ a god-like status. In Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) the AI construct named HAL takes over the spaceship and kills almost every crew member. HAL is omnipresent because it resides in cyberspace in a spiritual form; however HAL is physical too. The AI’s ability to control all systems of the spaceship makes this possible. Similar examples can be found in the video game from 1999, entitled *System Shock 2*, in which the rogue AI named Shodan struggles to possess the limited space that is the spaceship, with the help of the player. On a larger scale, in fiction, AIs can also rule the entire planet due to their omnipresence that is enabled by advanced technology. Such AIs are for instance presented in James Cameron’s *Terminator* (1984) and Wachowski’s *Matrix* (1999). In both movies the AIs reign on Earth because technology is omnipresent as they are. Nevertheless, all those examples are quite different from the way AI works today, because in the actual world AI “systems are not autonomous, rational, or able to discern anything without extensive, computationally intensive training with large datasets or predefined rules and rewards. In fact, artificial intelligence as we know

⁸Breen, *The Voice of Evil: a narratological study of demonic characters in Old English literature*, 2–3.

⁹Wetters, *Demonic History: from Goethe to the present*, 194.

¹⁰Peak, “Horror of the Real: H.P. Lovecraft’s Old Ones and contemporary speculative philosophy,” 166.

¹¹Isabella Hermann, “Artificial intelligence in fiction: between narratives and metaphors,” *AI & Soc* 38, 4 (2023): 320.

it depends entirely on a much wider set of political and social structures.”¹² As of now AIs in the actual world are therefore unable to become individual characters or entities. They can be total but not personal; hence their presence is limited by their closed systems and the data they are fed by.

A problem appears when it is unclear whether a character is something else than human because of its physical characteristics typically ascribed to humans. A physical character might appear, seem human, yet simultaneously it may telegraph signs of its second nature. Such ambiguous characters may possess a wider knowledge about a storyworld, or they might even influence it directly. Appearing human is thus the result of their omnipresent properties. Omnipresent characters are quite often concealed as humans. Their complete nature is obscured. Thus the ontological spaces they occupy within the storyworld remain unclear.

In the following part I intend to analyze Judge Holden from Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Blood Meridian* (1985). I will take into consideration both his actions and appearance in order to assess whether he occupies ontological spaces different from the rest of the characters of the novel. Further, I will evaluate what literary techniques serve to make Judge Holden omnipresent, and to what end. *Blood Meridian* is a naturalistic novel, often compared to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. It is supposed to be realistic and Judge seems as Steven Shaviro notes “descended from another world.”¹³ I will discuss what this other world or other ontological space could be, or whether there could be more than one other world.

In order to present a clear distinction be-

tween worlds within *Blood Meridian*’s story-world I will apply Marie-Laure Ryan’s take on possible worlds theory. Some scholars, such as Saul Kripke, who represents modal logic, focus on probability in the actual world. Others such as Thomas Pavel, Lubomir Dolezel and Marie-Laure Ryan intend to discuss “the problem of the relationship between the literary work and the real world”¹⁴, applying possible worlds theory. Ryan bases her assumptions on the words of modal realist David Lewis who claimed that the difference between worlds is “merely a matter of point of view: *actual* is an indexical term, like *I* or *here* or *now*, whose reference depends on the speaker.”¹⁵ From this perspective the world presented in a novel, such as *Blood Meridian*, becomes actual for its inhabitants, the characters. Further, a storyworld is “a mental representation of a narrative text.”¹⁶ It becomes actual for the reader whose focus is recentered into the minds of the characters in the reading process. The main character, the protagonist of *Blood Meridian* is a young outlaw called the kid. For him the actual world is a harsh, naturalistic Western Frontier of the mid-19th century. All his dreams and thoughts remain non-existent possible worlds while he struggles to survive in the brutal textual actual world where he is grounded in by his physicality. Therefore the judge’s omnipresence manifests contrast to the kid’s humanity. As Ryan underlines, “sorting out ‘what is’ from ‘what is not’ is a fundamental interpretive operation for all storyworlds, whether fictional or factual.”¹⁷ Hence her take on possible worlds theory will be my tool in the analysis of Judge Holden’s ontological affiliation. Acknowledging the storyworld as actual creates a reference point from which other on-

¹²Crawford, *Atlas of AI: power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*, 8.

¹³Shaviro, “The very life of darkness,” 148.

¹⁴Thomas G. Pavel, “‘Possible worlds’ in literary semantics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 2 (1975): 165.

¹⁵Ryan, *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds: what is, what if, as if*, 3.

¹⁶*Ibid*, 6

¹⁷*Ibid*, 8

tological spaces might be assessed. I will dissect the invisible worlds/ontological spaces where omnipresent characters might lurk and thus overpower other characters who are unable to move beyond their actual world, and decide if Judge Holden can be named as such an entity.

First of all, Holden is a physical being existing in the same textual actual world as the kid. He has certain physical properties, described in detail as he first appears in the novel:

An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bold as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height and he stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it for now he put it on again.¹⁸

His physicality is emphasized, as he is a huge man. Further, his skin, a visual feature that outlines human flesh, is not covered by any hair. It might suggest that he is well acquainted with the physical, actual world. His naked face and bald head indicate that he is an exposed, moving, breathing piece of meat, depraved of some human visuals, perfectly fit to thrive in the violent, physical world. Further, his behavior implies that he holds in contempt religion and the house of God. At this point the reader cannot be certain what is the reason for it, but among the possibilities is that he himself is a god-like being and he does not want any competition.

The question of the judge's origin is addressed at the end of the novel, when the kid sees him in his dream. Dreams are possible worlds, experienced from the actual world by a sleeping individual. The dreamworld is one of

the ontological spaces the Judge can invade. In the dream Holden's past is discussed. As James Dorson acknowledges,

the judge's origins are indeed mystical. There is no "atavistic egg," neither divine nor secular, that can explain or legitimate his existence. There is no ground to base his rule upon, just "the shore of a void" from which all of his unfathomable malice arises. As such, he is the perfect image of a groundless violence.¹⁹

The judge's origins are impossible to discover. He is therefore omnipresent, because unlike any other mortal human, he came out of nowhere. A mystery surrounds him and provides him with the possibility to transcend and exploit his own physicality. Past events constitute memories, which presented in the form of told recollections may form a separate possible world which becomes part of the actual world, legitimizing the present existence of the individual. Lack of plausible origin in the case of the judge is therefore purposeful. A character such as he gains omnipresent qualities not only by accessing additional ontological spaces, but also by avoiding or escaping those spaces well-known to humans; an example of this might be the coherent past.

The past is an ontological space which anchors human characters to their actual worlds. Holden is free of such constraints. His attitude towards the stable, ancient order of the universe is expressed in the following passage: "The judge seized that great slag wandered for what millennia from what unreckonable corner of the universe and he raised it overhead and stood tottering and then lunged forward."²⁰ The slag refers to the meteorite the gang of outlaws encounters. They decide to use it for a throwing

¹⁸McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 6.

¹⁹James Dorson, "Demystifying the judge: law and mythical violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 2 (2013): 11.

²⁰McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 253.

contest which the judge wins. The meteorite might signify an ultimate physicality marking the actual world and Holden holds the power to throw it as a mere toy. Hence he proves that the textual actual world is not his only world. He is a being conscious of how the textual actual world works, as if he was an advanced player in a complex game, remaining aware that it is only a game. Joshua Comyn brings forward texts of other scholars to emphasize Judge Holden's role of a "trickster."²¹ The term is accurate because it encompasses the multiple other roles of the judge: "linguist, dancer, naturalist, warrior, judge...."²² Judge Holden is a trickster, a role-player that knows all the rules of the game and exploits them for his malevolent purposes. He performed a trick with a coin after which he said "what all men knew that there are coins and false coins."²³ Later, however, no one could prove that the trick was only a trick because there was no physical evidence; the coin thrown by Holden was gone. Only the judge can judge which coins are false and which are genuine. Therefore, another ontological space appears which the omnipresent character might occupy. It is a gameworld. *Blood Meridian* consists of a gameworld because it includes the trickster. Holden overcomes the rules governing the harsh, physical world of McCarthy's novel because he is the incarnation of these rules. Only he can traverse the gameworld of *Blood Meridian* as he pleases, and it is perceived as a crude game only from his perspective. Its structures are hidden to the reader and the centralized protagonist, the kid. They are simply indicated by

the Judge's actions described by the third person narrator. Holden confirms his reign over *Blood Meridian's* gameworld when he speaks of war. First he states that "men are born for games. Nothing else."²⁴ Through these words he discloses his point of view. He also reveals the nature of the game he plays and its true name: "War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god."²⁵ For Holden war means god means game. From his perspective they are the same: an omnipresent playground, the gameworld he controls. The gameworld of *Blood Meridian* can also be perceived as structured with tarot's cards. Joshua Comyn quotes critic Rick Walach who noted that "we should be wary of the judge's pronouncements; the real hostility operates, like the tarot cards, on the metatextual level."²⁶ The metatextual aspect of McCarthy's novel places Judge Holden in yet another ontological space.

As Judge Holden is a man of many masks, in his article Comyn elaborates on Holden's role of an author. He argues that, "the fictional author of the novel is the judge, the man called Holden."²⁷ This perspective grants the judge the highest possible authority in the textual actual world formed by the third person narrator. Comyn underlines that the "judge exists, in a metatextual way, outside the story of the text, as fictional author."²⁸ Therefore he occupies an ontological space reserved for the author himself, that is, Cormac McCarthy; thus Holden transcends his own fictionality. Comyn provides multiple passages to confirm his argument, also putting the kid in the position of the

²¹Joshua Comyn, "'What's he a judge of?': the effacement of agency and an ethics of reading in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2015): 56

²²*Ibid.*, 56.

²³McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 259.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 262.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 263.

²⁶Joshua Comyn, "'What's he a judge of?': the effacement of agency and an ethics of reading in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 13, no. 1 (2015): 67.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 64.

reader. He maintains that the reader is “rendered powerless by the radical ambiguity of the trickster and his environment – the text.”²⁹ The reader is not able to interfere with the text in any way. The kid, as any other reader of the novel is therefore just a witness of this world. The relationship between the judge as the author and his text is given yet another form at the end of the novel. Holden as the author comments on events occurring on a stage as if it was his own play that was staged. The play is the world, which he describes as “an event, a ceremony. The orchestration thereof.”³⁰ Viewing *Blood Meridian* as the judge’s play in motion seems even more accurate since the viewer is completely impotent; reading a novel requires action, involvement. In both cases it is evident that the judge is present on a metatextual level as the fictional author of the novel. That being said the metatextual level can only be observed from the outside of *Blood Meridian*’s storyworld.

Inside, from the perspective of the textual actual world and the kid as the protagonist, Holden can also be perceived as the author of his own book. In a mimetic fashion he describes artifacts of the textual actual world in order to fill his notebook, because “he is a draftsman as he is other things, well sufficient to the task.”³¹ Afterwards he destroys the originals, explaining that, “it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of men.”³² The judge notices that objects encountered by people are only elements of a narrative. Obscuring them from the textual actual world and putting them in his book, Holden becomes their master or god. He further explicates that a book might consist of a world: “Whether in

my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world.”³³ Later the judge also tells the story of the harnessmaker. The judge is a storyteller, and the stories whose elements he gathers in his notebook, or of whose characters, such as the harnessmaker he speaks, are possible worlds he is able to control. Ontologically speaking he, as any other storyteller, is an invisible creator of worlds and might be viewed as such exactly by the harnessmaker he describes.

The metatextual level is neither a part of the actual world nor of the storyworld of *Blood Meridian*. Instead it makes them overlap because of the aforementioned role of the judge as the author of the novel itself. As the author of a text is its god, the judge is precisely that. He is able to survive everything, and his body remains unaffected. Furthermore, he is ubiquitous, as he often seems to appear out of thin air, and hears and sees everything. The final sentences of the novel state that, “he never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.”³⁴ This is a description of actions reserved for omnipresent, god-like characters that occupy a possible world, inaccessible to human characters such as the kid. This world is also hidden for the reader of the novel. It exists only for the judge, the horrible god of *Blood Meridian*. God is a creator and so is the judge in a literal sense. The knowledge he has gathered, perhaps in the space restricted for omnipresent beings, allows him to create real bullets out of “foul matrix.”³⁵ He can be compared to Jesus Christ who turned water into wine. The judge can supposedly exist in

²⁹*Ibid*, 65.

³⁰McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, 347.

³¹*Ibid*, 147

³²*ibid*, 148

³³*Ibid*, 148

³⁴*Ibid*, 353

³⁵*Ibid*, 140

the god world of *Blood Meridian*; however, he can also assume a human, physical existence.

Making a full circle, at the end I want to emphasize that despite his access to other ontological spaces, Judge Holden exists in this story-world as a being of flesh and blood. Even moving through the desert he remains “pale pink beneath his tale of dust like something newly born.”³⁶ He often walks naked, exposing his physicality. Through his bodily presence he channels his abilities from the other worlds he dwells in in order to directly influence the inhabitants of the textual actual world. The final encounter between the kid and the judge is described as follows: “The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shut the wooden barlatch home behind him.”³⁷ Without a body in the textual actual world Holden would remain a spiritual being. On the other hand, his body combined with his ability to travers other ontological spaces makes him superior towards the kid. He is omnipresent not only as a spirit but, significantly, as a physical entity. His flesh flows through the brutal, naturalistic world of *Blood Meridian* as naturally as a spirit might flow through the invisible ghost world.

Concluding, the crucial factor of possible worlds theory is a reference point, a specific perspective through which the reader perceives the textual actual world. In Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* the reader’s focus is recentered into that of the kid; thus his world becomes the actual one for the time of the reading. From the kid’s point of view it is possible to elicit the following ontological spaces that an omnipresent character such as the judge might occupy: the textual actual world (physical entity), the dreamworld (dream/nightmare), the gameworld (omnipresent trickster), the worlds

of Holden’s book and stories (the author), the god/creator (the spiritual world). The metatextual level can only be observed from the outside (here the judge is the author of *Blood Meridian* itself). The lack of a past ontological space in the case of the judge is also meaningful as it distances him from the human characters. It is precisely Holden’s capacity to transgress the boundaries between worlds that make him omnipresent. McCarthy skillfully forms a character that is larger than one specific world, without destroying it. Judge Holden exists in multiple ontological spaces. They influence each other and upon a closer look provide the judge with complete authority over *Blood Meridian*’s storyworld, which enables the reader to see him as the brutal, naturalistic frontier anthropomorphized.

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³⁶*Ibid*, 297

³⁷*Ibid*, 351

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Correspondence: Mikołaj Marks, e: mikolaj.marks@phdstud.ug.edu.pl.

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